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AMERICAN FRIENDS SERVICE COMMITTEE

REPORT ON AGRICULTURAL LABOR PROJECT

October 1956

Launching the Project

In response to a long time concern of the A.F.S.C. to undertake work for the betterment of the lives of migrant laborers, the Farm Labor project was undertaken, starting December 1, 1955, with the employment of Bard McAllister and financed by Fleishhacker Foundation, Eastman Foundation and a citizen of San Francisco. The project was envisaged as a long range one - at least three years - and was to be "curative rather than ameliorative." The Committee felt that the work should be directed in the main to help the settled or settling migrant. The problems of the bonafide migrant are so elusive and involve so wide an area (the whole Pacific coast as well as many Eastern states) that the Committee felt unable to cope with such an immense and fluctuating phenomenon. In the San Joaquin Valley, also, the strictly itinerant worker is largely disappearing and the problem due to a number of causes is not nearly as acute as it was ten years ago. On the other hand, the farm laborers who have established residence, however marginal, have demonstrated a certain degree of personal responsibility and have also become individuals eligible for state and county welfare and educational services. The Social-Industrial Committee, to whom was assigned the direction of this project, decided in consultation with authorities in the field that efforts could be most profitably directed to the group of settling migrants, to help them to become established and improve their living conditions and to become integrated in the larger community. The name of the project was changed to conform with this purpose to "Agricultural

Labor Project" rather than Migrant Labor, as originally stated.

Staff Directive and Location

After preliminary surveys by members of the Committee and staff the general area of Bakersfield - Fresno - Mendota was selected as constituting the area of greatest need. Because Tulare County has one of the largest agricultural revenues in the United States and the greatest diversity of crops, it seemed a logical place to start. Another factor determining the location was the attitude of the agency representatives in that county who expressed eagerness to work with the Service Committee and promised full cooperation. Although the original prospectus indicated that a community center, self-help housing and off-season industry might be effective means of bringing about the desired ends, the worker was left very free to investigate the situation, to explore needs and fit in wherever openings were revealed. He was intentionally given no blueprint of procedure because no one seemed sure enough of the real needs of this particular group to make one. He therefore arrived in the area with a very nebulous directive from the Committee and an almost completely free hand in determining where, when and how he should proceed.

Preliminary Survey by Staff

The first necessity, therefore, was to familiarize himself with the geography of the county, not only physical but human, to locate the large ranches, to map the various types of agricultural labor camps and the marginal communities with which he was concerned. No such map existed in the county but by dint of much travelling up and down, McAllister finally listed 107 contract or grower-owner camps, 50 so-called "tourist cabin" camps, 5 procurement centers for Mexican nationals, 3 centers operated by housing authorities and 63 marginal communities. The next step was making the acquaintance of the government agency

workers.... The Home Agent of the Agricultural Extension Service, the Farm Labor secretary, a supervisor of county schools, the manager of the Farm Labor Procurement Center, the District Attorney, Director Child Services Welfare Department, Director Region 3, California Farm Bureau Federation, County Planning Commission, County Housing Authority, Division of Housing inspector and employees of utility services and many others. These interviews were time-consuming but of enormous importance to subsequent activity. The map which McAllister made was much appreciated by these agencies as well as by the Migrant Ministry of the Council of Churches.

McAllister soon discovered that while there existed a Tulare County Council of Health and Welfare Services in name, it had become relatively inactive. At the instigation of McAllister and several representatives of the organizations mentioned above, this Council became re-animated. It held three meetings during the spring and one this fall. The membership in this Council consists of 47 agencies, both public and private. This group, of which the Service Committee has become part, may well prove an important avenue of approach to wider local participation in our enterprise.

The 63 substandard housing areas range in population between 25 to 2500. Two of them are almost entirely Negro, some largely Mexican-American, some entirely Anglo, but many completely mixed. The inhabitants of these settlements have in common a great suspicion towards government officials, towards any outsider and indeed towards one another. Each man is for himself. The leadership which is expected from older, better established citizens in most communities is lacking here, and if any one tends to assume leadership he is quickly discredited by his neighbors. This makes the job of helping these people one of extreme delicacy and of extreme slowness. The worker must be willing to listen, to appear absolutely non-partisan, to build confidence by

non-aggressiveness, to offer suggestions tentatively and to hope that such suggestions will emerge as the group's own thinking. A good example of this situation and the techniques used to resolve it are indicated in the report below regarding Teviston. (Section 1 under Community Work).

The average employment for the breadwinner of these families extends for only 32 weeks in a year. Even this is intermittent employment, averaging about two weeks with each employer. The worker's vocational skills are limited by his lack of experience and his sense of inferiority, preventing him from attempting new types of work. He does not save - indeed how can he on such a limited income? - and is often ready prey to the salesman who holds out the lure of "easy terms". In many of these settlements there are no street lights, no plumbing, often not even water. Those without means of transportation pay as much as 25¢ for a 15 gallon can of water to be hauled to their doors.

These communities, as might be expected, have a heavy welfare case load; there are large families; juvenile delinquency runs high and in certain school districts 100% of the children from these areas receive free lunches from December until March.

It is quite obvious that these facts should be of terrific import to all residents of the county but for years the so-called responsible citizens have more or less ignored the existence of these conditions. It is high time that some thought be given to the workers upon whom 77% of the county wealth depends and who participate very little in the prosperity of this region.

Taking into consideration the widely scattered location and the exceedingly primitive characteristics, a community center as originally conceived in the overall plan, did not seem the most important objective. More vital appeared to be the improvement of the living conditions, the development of a sense of

balonging to a community and the experience of working together for a common cause.

Community Work - Teviston

The first group whose extreme needs were encountered by McAllister soon after his arrival, at the suggestion of the Home Agent of the Agricultural Extension Service, lived at Teviston. Teviston was a tract of approximately 183 acres sold by a speculator mostly to Negroes during the war. Eighty-odd families reside there now, most of whom work in agriculture. The houses are nothing but shacks, but they are owned by the residents. The greatest need is for water. Homeowners have to pack water from a distance of $2\frac{1}{2}$ miles. There are no paved roads. People bought their holdings without benefit of surveys and understandings as to "metes and bounds". This uncertainty has led to many tensions in the district. Since the need for water was so urgent the development of a water district became McAllister's entering wedge to help this group tackle a common objective and merge their differences for the sake of community welfare.

The orderly steps of procedure for setting up a Community Services District seem simple to most of us who are familiar with the American form of government and the typical middle-class community. But the procedure at Teviston has not been simple. First suspicion had to be overcome. Questions arose as to the motivation of the A.F.S.C. worker. One fellow wanted to know, "Who are the Quakers?" One of the others answered, "You know about the Quakers. They are the people who started this country anyway. You know, in Boston and all."

Gradually trust and confidence grew, mostly through patient, non-interference during most of the incredibly long-winded and laboriously slow weekly

discussions. Suggestions were presented only at the crucial point where an impasse was reached, or the techniques of further procedure were beyond the knowledge of the group. (It took 12 meetings before even the better-educated began to understand the procedures involved.)

When officers for the Improvement Association were elected old resentments flared up, but these difficulties were mild compared to the conflict created when bonds and taxes were mentioned in connection with financing the water system. in Almost every citizen had a story to tell about the way they had been mistreated because of their color, by representatives of the government. The story was circulated and all too widely accepted, that the whole project was a scheme of the county to acquire their land for a sandpit. Endless time was spent by McAllister explaining the wisdom of bonds and tax financing. The project was delayed about two months over the issue of whether or not to employ a lawyer to help draw up the petition. "Why should we pay \$800 for a lawyer? What do we have a Board of Supervisors for, anyway?" At long last the petition has been draw n up and presented. The hearing will be held on October 16 before the Board of Supervisors. The lawyer and McAllister will be present, but most important, two representatives chosen by the group will be there to speak for themselves and their fellows and will report back at the next meeting. They were also encouraged to bring up the questions of roads, paving, street lights, widening access road and marking of highway entrance.

Much space has been given to describing the work in this community because it is typical of what might happen in many other of the 63 sub-standard areas. It is a moving experience to see these Negro people, weary from long hours of work in the fields, gathering in the little bare wooden church, with its battered piano, and uncomfortable benches, to discover their rights as citizens and

experience for the first time the privileges and duties of democracy. The tall, lanky, very dark Deacon opens the meeting with a song, "He Leadeth Me." He rings a bell and we all stand for prayer - a folksy conversation with "Our Father." He rings a bell and we all sit and the meeting begins, the Deacon twisting a little piece of paper around his fingers that has the order of business on it. Long pauses occur, the chairman urges, "somebody say something." Finally someone gets up and fumbles for the words to express a dimly conceived idea. Slowly, very slowly, a decision emerges and the Deacon heaves a sigh and says, "Well, I guess that's decided. Now let's see what else we have to do." McAllister speaks only twice at the crucial points of urging them to decide on the methods of financing and clarifying the other demands they need to make regarding other necessary improvements.

These results may seem insignificant but the gains are tremendous considering the totally individualistic and hopeless attitudes that prevailed a year ago. An indication of the change is evidenced by the number who have registered to vote for the first time in their lives (already more than double the previous registration in that district). Potential leadership is developing and what is equally important, confidence in and willingness to let that leadership represent them. Expressions of appreciation of McAllister's help were spontaneously expressed to the members of the committee who visited the group. "He's been a good friend." "Right along has helped us." "We think a lot of Mr. McAllister", etc., etc.

Due to activities on the part of Teviston, county agencies became aware of its existence. The County Health office suggested sending their TB mobile unit for chest examinations. When McAllister told them about it, one of the residents said, "Do you mean to say they're going to send that to Teviston?"

and someone else said, "They're coming here?" On being assured that such was the case, you could almost see the group grow a couple of inches in stature, sit up straighter and look you in the eye.

The County Library also became aware of Teviston and the Bookmobile is going to stop there regularly. This innovation was also met with incredulity. They just couldn't imagine that county authorities would think they mattered that much.

Other communities where work has been done will be more briefly described.

London

A community of about 150 homes developed on a land contract basis by H. J. Bortsch. Out of 144 heads-of-households, only fourteen have year-round employment. The balance work in the crops as they find employment. Concern was expressed in conversation with some of the county agents for the youth of this district. Interest was stimulated in scouting and in 4H activities. Community meetings have discussed youth activities but the people seem to be waiting for someone to act for them to break down inertia and to discover potential leadership. The situation has been complicated by five churches competing for membership in the area. The founder of London is interested in his people. He encourages them to undertake home industries and community action. He has expressed the desire to expand the village on a self-help housing basis. Conversations between Mr. Bortsch and McAllister resulted in changing this community from an all-white unit to an "open occupancy" development. This is an entirely different set-up from Teviston and has many hopeful and some difficult aspects for future work.

Gosher

Goshen is one of the oldest towns in the valley. It presents one of

the drabest pictures of any of the shack towns, The population of about 1000 consists of 1/3 farmers living on outlying farms who provide leadership for the school district and other civic functions. They generally live apart from the other 2/3s of the population who are about equally divided between Mexican-Americans and Okie Americans with a smattering of Negroes. The latter groups are wholly dependent on agriculture for their living. Some of the "Oakies" are getting into service trades. It has been very difficult to attach onto any way of assisting in Goshen. Repeated staff visits have led to the blank wall of, "Goshen was here yesterday; it is here today; it will be here tomorrow." The need for street paving and activities for young people are obvious. Until recently the way had not opened, but recently the picture has somewhat changed.

The Mexican-Americans have begun to be exercised about training for citizenship and about a community water system. When McAllister told them about Teviston, they were greatly encouraged.

Also, since Goshen is the front door of Visalia, and Visalia hopes to attract some industrial and commercial enterprises, there is a move on the part of the Chamber of Commerce and other business interests to improve the looks of said front door. Negotiations are underway for Housing Act funds, by means of which a demonstration project might be developed which would involve street planning, installation of water and sewage systems, house renovation, self-help housing and recreational facilities. McAllister has been in consultation with Florence Conlin from the Housing and Home Finance Administration in San Francisco and it would seem possible that something very constructive might evolve in this situation. It is premature, however, to count on this too much since there are many intermediate steps to be taken and obstacles to overcome before such an exciting program can be launched.

Cameron Creek

Cameron Creek was hard hit by Christmas floods. The Red Cross was generous but was taken advantage of by some unscrupulous residents. The result has been that neighbor hostility, already prevalent, was intensified so that it is almost impossible to get three people into one conversation. An attempt was made this fall to organize a Little League Baseball group. It failed because of this lack of unity. However, because of the many children in this settlement, and parental concern for their welfare, community action may be possible later. It will be a slow, laborious process of overcoming antagonisms and building co-operation.

Allensworth

This community is an all-Negro community in the extreme southwest corner of the county. It is isolated, very barren, yet the folks are proud of their school community. The Home Agent found these people to be quick to learn sewing skills. They eagerly desire employment for the period after cotton picking is completed. The second-hand treadle sewing machines have been renovated for their use and an electric machine has been donated by a friend in the Bay Area who read about their work in the Friends' newsletter. It is anticipated that a home-industry will get underway this winter. So-called cuddle toys (or stuffed animals) will, it is hoped, find a market in the gift shops at Sequoia National Park and King's Canyon. It will be remembered that it was one of the original objectives of the project to develop off-season industry. This is a small enterprise but seems practical and valid and entails very little outlay of capital. Training will be provided from the Home Service of the Agricultural Extension whose worker in this area is very imaginative and resourceful. An unexpected gift of \$100 will also help greatly in the purchase of material.

Poplar

At the urgent request of a County Welfare worker and the Home Agent of the Extension Service, McAllister is just beginning to explore the possibilities of work at Poplar. Apparently the young people of this settlement have no recreation and no resources of any kind. Delinquency is prevalent and most high school girls of 15 or under have become pregnant. As one teen-ager expressed it, "Here we don't get married - we just change partners."

Common Problem

One baffling aspect that all these communities have in common, is that there is no central meeting place or focus of activity. In most other areas there is a store, or a bar or a club where people congregate to talk. But in Tulare County this is not true - people make their purchases and scurry out before someone steals their bag. At the bar they throw down a drink and leave in a hurry. Too many Pentacostal churches divide the inhabitants ^{to} in little jealous congregations. In order to meet people and find potential leadership it is necessary to go house to house and street to street and gradually build up relationships on a purely personal basis. How long this approach takes and how slowly out of it anything like an organization can evolve, makes progress seem terribly slow and negligible. In organizing the C.S.O. in San Jose and Alameda Counties, Fred Ross could meet groups of neighbors in the evening at one of their homes, but where neighbors do not speak, such coming together is impossible. It might almost be said to represent an end rather than a means!

Local Committee Chosen

The desirability for a local committee to work with McAllister has been strongly advocated by the Social Industrial Committee. Such a committee has been formed by McAllister this summer. To date it consists of:

Katherine Martin . . . Child Services, Tulare County Welfare Dept.
Eva Barns Supervising Nurse, Dept. of Public Health
Mary Ruth Dewey . . . Home Agent, Agricultural Extension Service
Allan Grant Rancher - Director Bureau 3 Calif. Bur. Fed.
Robert Haden District Attorney
Charles Rich General Supervisor, Tulare County Schools
Julius Stein Manager, Linnell Farm Labor Center
Burl and Edith Wood . Lindsay Friends Church

The committee meets the third Thursday evening of each month.

Future Plans

While the exploratory period of the Agricultural Labor Project can hardly be considered finished, there is still too much under-discovered and much as yet un-analyzed. Certain main directions, however, are emerging along the lines of which our worker plans to proceed. Briefly the program for the next six months will be conducted more or less along the following lines:

1. Carry along the Teviston water system to completion including the digging of ditches and laying of pipe by community crews. This will represent a simple engineering feat but a major social engineering project. If it is successful, news will spread to other substandard areas and it is hoped, will lead the way for similar self-help action in other places.

2. With the cooperation of the Agricultural Extension Service and the County Schools, seek to encourage other groups besides Allensworth to learn new vocational skills. It will be necessary to also develop marketing outlets for these products. Along this line also to try to discover individuals who could be interested in starting a small part-time business. The Visalia Chamber of Commerce is cooperating in this enterprise.

3. To explore the possibility of interesting growers in developing a system of labor management relations that can be advantageous to both grower and laborer and will offer the security that each group desires. Preliminary contacts have been made but it has seemed important to have a realistic notion

of the workers' problems before entering into discussions with employers. It is obvious that the approach to growers must be made with an open mind and considerable tact. It would appear that there are several in the vicinity who are aware of the deplorable living conditions of almost 1/3 of the citizens of Tulare County and who are ready to seek ways of amelioration and prevention. It is hoped that in the next six months constructive conversations may be had with these people and others not yet known to the committee. The Southern office of A.F.S.C. has promised help in this matter.

4. To seek ways that will forestall the growth of blighted areas while at the same time providing house and home ownership within the means of the worker. This project has the enthusiastic support of the Housing Authority, the Planning Commission, private real estate interests (!) and the regional office of the Housing and Home Finance Agency. Representatives of the San Francisco office have already been down to discuss possibilities with McAllister, as indicated in the previous report about Goshen.

5. To explore ways and means to permit the people with low incomes to avoid becoming the prey of loan sharks, pressure salesmen and excessive rates of interest. It is next to impossible for Negroes and Mexican-Americans and even white people of low incomes to procure loans in this community from banking and building loan institutions. Whether the credit union idea might help solve this dilemma or if there is some other solution, this is one of the big problems confronting the people we are concerned with.

6. To investigate the advisability of an invitational seminar with county leaders to discuss the stresses of labor in agriculture and what might be done to alleviate the conditions. This may be premature and should perhaps not be undertaken until late 1957 or even 1958. It will depend for its success

on our relationships with growers.

7. To continue services in communities already contacted and to extend the same to other areas as needs become evident and ways open.

8. To seek ways of making the general population of Tulare County more conscious of what goes on in their backyards and to make them realize the frightful cost of these depressed elements to the taxpayer. Not to mention, of course, humane and social concern for the well-being of fellow citizens. Talks have been given before a civic club, three church groups and a school administrators conference - also to the County Farm & Home Agency staff and the Friends' Church at Lindsay. Newspaper publicity has been avoided for obvious reasons. Doubtless knowledge of the Friends' project will increase with its wider functioning.

The committee feels that in the eight months that Bard McAllister has been functioning he has acquired detailed knowledge and understanding of the very complex and intricate problems associated with agriculture in this valley. We feel that he employs the patient, waiting attitude necessary to allow initiative to develop in underprivileged, inexperienced and untutored personalities. He has a deep respect and love for these humble people to which they instinctively respond and which we like to think of as the Friends' way of service.

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The A.F.S.C. views the Agricultural Labor Project as lasting at least three years. It will take that long to have results which will justify the investment. Truly significant developments may take five to ten years. The original donors who supplied the first year's budget (1956) have indicated a willingness to assist for three years, but on a decreasing scale.

Supplemental funds are needed for 1957 of from \$3000 to \$4000 of a budget totaling \$9,890. About half of the budget is for program materials, travel and office. As the work matures, additional funds may be needed for capital improvements or additional services.

The A.F.S.C. needs and welcomes financial participation. Checks should be sent to either of the following offices which together administer and finance the program:

American Friends Service Committee,
P. O. Box 966-M,
Pasadena, California

American Friends Service Committee,
1830 Sutter Street,
San Francisco 15, California.